



Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

Agenda Item No. 14.2

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MEMORANDUM

To: CMAP Board and MPO Policy Committee

From: CMAP staff

Date: October 2015

Re: Proposed projects to include in the next long-range plan

The next long-range regional plan is an opportunity to improve the definition and scope of transportation projects considered in the plan to best incorporate those that have regional impacts. Expanding the types of projects to be included can help ensure that policy makers have ready access to the best information possible to make cooperative, transparent, and prioritized investment decisions. At its July 2015 and September 2015 meetings, the Transportation Committee (TC) held discussions on alternative thresholds for projects to include in the next long-range plan. This memo distills those two discussions, describes conversations with partner agencies, and includes examples from peer MPOs to provide potential thresholds for projects to include in the plan.

Reconsidering Project Types included in the Long-Range Plan

CMAP currently defines “major capital projects” as capacity additions to the expressway system or comparable changes to the transit system, generally meaning a rail extension. However, this is a limited view of the region’s transportation system. Projects that fall below the level of new capacity on expressways and rail lines clearly have important impacts on the region, and cumulatively they may well have a larger effect than the currently defined major capital projects. The narrowness of the definition does not fully capture the contributions and priorities of all of the region’s transportation implementers. Likewise, since they are so few and so large, the geographic distribution of major capital projects at the current threshold tends to be “lumpy” and can present a challenge in demonstrating that the entire region benefits from them. Lastly, specific investments are needed to achieve the plan indicators; to show progress on them, a larger set of project types would be helpful.

Some guidance has already been provided on which types of projects to include in the next regional plan. First, the CMAP Board’s [guidance](#) resulting from its 2014 visioning session suggests a larger set of projects should be considered in the plan. Second, in its [2014 MPO certification review](#), the U.S. DOT recommended that the next plan include some non-capacity improvements and in general base the threshold for inclusion of projects on their impact rather

than their scope. For example, bus rapid transit (BRT) systems may have similar service characteristics and travel benefits to rail transit, and should be included along with more traditional heavy rail and commuter rail projects. Similarly, large reconstruction projects may have regionally significant impacts even if they add little or no capacity to the network.

CMAP staff also reviewed how other large MPOs treat projects within the context of a long-range regional transportation plan (see the table in Appendix A of the [September 2015 TC memo](#) for more detail). Like GO TO 2040, these MPOs describe preferred transportation strategies and support for high-level policies in their transportation plans, but they do not confine their long-range plan recommendations as narrowly as GO TO 2040's major capital projects. For instance, the Seattle area's definition of regional capacity projects includes a broad set of project work types – additional lanes, new street realignment, new interchanges, grade separations, new transit stations, among others – as long as they are on a pre-defined regionally significant transportation network. The Washington, DC, MPO includes any project deemed regionally significant for air quality purposes.¹ The Dallas MPO includes rail projects as well as capacity additions to “regionally significant arterials.” The New York and Southern California MPOs include many highway and transit rehabilitation projects in addition to most new capacity.

Proposal for Projects to Include in the Next Long-Range Plan

Given the discussion above, it is proposed that the next regional plan specifically list projects that:

1. Cost more than \$100 million and change capacity on the National Highway System (NHS²) or that are new expressways or principal arterials, or (b) change capacity on transit services with some separate rights-of-way or shared right-of-way where transit has priority over other traffic; or
2. Cost at least \$250 million, regardless of the facility type or work type.

For highways, a project is determined to be regionally significant if it changes capacity on a regionally significant network. As the NHS is the focus of federal highway performance management, the NHS is clearly also a regionally significant network. Thus, this proposal would now consider principal arterials as well as the expressways considered in previous regional plans, helping to make the next regional plan more effective at addressing congestion and other highway needs. For example, principal arterials carry 25 percent of the vehicle miles traveled in the region (expressways, which are already addressed under the current major capital project definition, carry 32 percent) and have almost twice as much total congestion delay as the expressways.

¹ For TIP and air quality conformity purposes, federal rules define a regionally significant project as one on a “facility which serves regional transportation needs,” which “at a minimum... includes all principal arterial highways and all fixed guideway transit facilities that offer a significant alternative to regional highway travel” (23 CFR 450.104).

² The NHS includes the expressway system and other principal arterials as well as limited mileage of intermodal connectors.

On the transit side, the definition above is meant to capture projects with regional impacts similar to rail service expansion in terms of capacity and quality of service – including BRT and arterial rapid transit (ART) projects. While the cost of an individual ART project typically would be less than \$100 million, these projects could be considered as a program.³ Since bicycle and pedestrian projects will only rarely meet the \$100 million threshold, investment needs for non-motorized travel should be discussed at the program level in a regional plan rather than being individually listed.

Projects that change capacity are those with **non-exempt TIP work types**, in other words those that are already considered under federal rules to demonstrate air quality conformity. The non-capacity projects that the certification review encouraged the plan to contain would be captured in the second threshold of \$250 million.

Role of Cost Thresholds

The cost thresholds are meant to place practical limits on the total number of projects to be considered in the regional plan to make the evaluation process manageable. They also give further definition to the idea of a regionally significant project by using cost as a measure of scale. Several TC members, but not all, have voiced support for the use of cost thresholds.

Candidate projects would be compared to the cost thresholds based on current dollars (any conversion to year-of-expenditure cost would be carried out by CMAP when necessary to meet federal rules). The entire project cost, not just the cost of the capacity, would be used to determine whether the project is regionally significant. Since several smaller projects, such as intersection improvements and additional lanes, in a corridor can ultimately amount to a larger project, sponsors would be encouraged to consider the cost and scope of the entire build-out expected in the corridor over the time frame of the regional plan.

While any number of projects could be proposed as part of the upcoming planning process, the TIP database provides some sense of the universe of projects that meet the proposed thresholds. Considering both projects that are already awarded from the database as well as those that are not funded (“illustrative projects”) provides a roughly ten-year window of projects proposed in the region. Of these, **79 projects meet the proposed thresholds**, although given the longer timeframe of the plan, the number of projects considered will likely be higher. In comparison, the GO TO 2040 update planning process considered a universe of 56 projects and recommended 17 of them, plus the CREATE program as a whole.

Conclusion

These thresholds would be relatively simple to implement, would allow a reasonably sized universe of projects to be considered in the long-range plan, would meet CMAP Board direction in increasing the next plan’s specificity with regard to transportation projects, and would address the recommendation in the U.S. DOT’s certification review. Most importantly, the

³ The certification review also indicated that any project seeking to move into the Engineering phase of the FTA Capital Investment Grant program needs to be listed in the long-range transportation plan. Any individual project in such as program can be specifically itemized to meet the recommendations of the certification review.

proposed threshold will still allow the plan to identify the most critical projects in the region and to focus resources on accomplishing them.

The Board and MPO Policy Committee should be aware that the new definition might entail more plan amendments than the current GO TO 2040 definition, but the plan amendment process at CMAP can be streamlined. Furthermore, the financial plan should be developed so that amending the long-range plan does not necessarily require removing or reducing the scope of another project to maintain fiscal constraint. At the same time, the plan amendment process should not become purely administrative in nature – only special or unforeseen circumstances should require amending the plan outside of the four-year update cycle. Note finally that specifically listing a project in the long-range plan or calling it regionally significant does not trigger any other federal or state requirements for implementers except requiring that the project be included in the conformity determination for the region without having to have funding identified within the TIP.

Following the discussion at the joint Board and MPO Policy Committee meeting, staff plans to address any further direction that results and finalize the proposal with the TC in November. Staff will also reach out to agencies to discuss potential projects that might meet the proposed thresholds.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion

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